

Lilly's Auto Camp
8877 Monterey Highway
Gilroy
Santa Clara County
California

HABS No. CA-2094

HABS
CAL.
43-GIL,
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Architectural and Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

LILLY'S AUTO CAMP¹

HABS No. CA-2094

Location: 8877 Monterey Highway² (Corner of Ronan Ave.) Gilroy,
Santa Clara County, California.

USGS Gilroy Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator
Coordinates: 10.626560.4098470

Present Owners: Hermann H. and Irma Schwabel
3550 Whitsell Avenue
Palo Alto, CA 94306

Present Occupants: Vacant (office); various tenants (typical unit)

Present Use: Storage (office); apartment (typical unit)³

Significance: Forerunner of the modern motel, the "cabin camp" first
appeared in California in the mid-1920s. This one--located
on what was then the main automobile route between San
Francisco and Los Angeles⁴--was operated by Allen and
Alice Lilly from about 1927 until 1932. Each of fifteen
cabins was sparsely furnished with a double bed, table, one
or two chairs, metered gas stove, and small toilet. Showers
were located in a small building to the north. A separate
build- ing to the north--now substantially altered--served
as a combination office, grocery store, restaurant, and
filling station.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION:

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: ca. 1927.⁵
2. Architect: None known.
3. Original plans, etc.: None known. Contents of the buildings in 1932 and 1935 (cabins only) are listed in detail in personal property mortgages recorded in Official Records, book 608, page 525 and book 744, page 512 (Office of the Recorder of Deeds, Santa Clara County, California).
4. Alterations and additions: The so-called "office" structure has been substantially altered and now bears little resemblance to the roadside restaurant/filling station that stood here in the 1920s and 1930s. The front wall, for example, has been brought forward to enclose the original gasoline pump island. Interior integrity is presumably poor as well.

Of fifteen cabins standing in 1932, ten survive. These appear to have been little changed save for minor alterations such as the replacement, in part, of original roofing materials.

5. Original and subsequent owners: The following is an incomplete chain of title to the land on which stands Lilly's Auto Camp. References are found in the Office of the Recorder of Deeds, Santa Clara County, California.

1929. Grant Deed, March 1, 1929 (recorded April 11, 1929 in Official Records, book 459, page 237). E. M. Schumacher to Allen J. Lilly and Alice Lilly, his wife, and S. W. Lilly, "unmarried," Lot 3 in Block 1 of the North Gilroy Tract, as shown in Maps, book W, pages 14, 15.⁶
1932. Deed, April 27, 1932 (recorded April 27, 1932 in Official Records, book 615, page 37). Allen J. Lilly and Alice Lilly, his wife, and S. W. Lilly, "unmarried," to Ernest Watson, "unmarried," Lot 3 in Block 1 of the North Gilroy Tract, as described.⁷
1932. Deed, July, 1932. Ernest Watson to L. E. M. Cosmey et al., Lot 3 in Block 1 of the North Gilroy Tract, as described.⁸
1934. Deed, May 9, 1934 (recorded May 12, 1934 in Official Records, book 685, page 334). L. E. M. Cosmey and Alice S. Cosmey, his wife, to H. A. Alberthal and Mary Alberthal, his wife, Lot 3 in Block 1 of the North Gilroy Tract, as described.
1936. Grant Deed, November 5, 1936 (recorded November 10, 1936 in Official Records, book 791, page 364). H. A. Alberthal and Mary Alberthal, his wife, to H. B. Shoemaker and Leora M. Elmore, Lot 3 in Block 1 of the North Gilroy Tract, as described.
1962. Grant Deed--Joint Tenancy, September 5, 1962 (recorded September 11, 1962 in Official Records, book 6713, page 483). Leora M. Elmore to Hermann H. Schwabel and Irma Schwabel, his wife, part of Lot 3 in Block 1 of the North Gilroy Tract, "beginning at the point of intersection of the Northwesterly line of Ronan Avenue with the Southwesterly line of Monterey Road...thence along said line of Ronan Avenue South 72°40' West 336.17 feet to the intersection thereof with the Northeasterly line of Lilly Avenue, thence along said line of Lilly Avenue North 13°15' West 124.1 feet to the most Westerly corner of Lot 3 in Block 1 as shown upon the map hereinafter referred to, thence along said line dividing Lot 2 and Lot 3 in said Block 1 North 72°50' East 37.2 feet, North 55°15' East 206.3 feet, and

North 65°53' East 77.13 feet to the Southwesterly line of Monterey Road, thence along said line of Monterey Road South 22°18'30" East 195.85 feet to the point of beginning," as shown in Maps, book W, pages 14, 15.⁹

- B. Historical context: "Motor touring" has always been an important element in America's enduring love affair with the car. In fact, automobile use in the years before World War II was primarily recreational. Not that early motor tourists were accustomed to the host of roadside services--the food stands, the filling stations, the motor hotels--that we take for granted; far from it. Rather, they "camped by the side of the road," in the words of historian Warren James Belasco, "...sleeping in cars or tents, cooking over smoky campfires."¹⁰

It was not until 1920 or so that the first public and private campgrounds--or "autocamps"--began to appear along major automobile routes. These provided the auto tourist with basic amenities such as bathroom and laundry facilities and, equally important, with good company. Indeed, the autocamp was said to resemble "...a huge old-fashioned family reunion"--in warm, dry weather, at least.¹¹

For the auto camper--like the "auto gypsy" before him--remained at the mercy of the elements. Beginning about 1925, however, enterprising pay camp operators in California sought to extend the tourist season year-round by erecting (if that is not too dignified a word) the first "cabin camps." These early cabins were little more than crude shacks, "wooden tents with dirt floors."¹² Nevertheless, the cabin camp relieved the motor tourist of the daily chore of pitching and striking a tent, while costing (at 50¢ or 75¢ a night) little more than a campground. And soon--for just a dollar more, perhaps less--he could enjoy the relative comfort of what was often termed a "cozy cottage," complete with stuffed cotton mattress, table, chairs, perhaps a gas plate--even a toilet. Writes Belasco, "This was a real breakthrough, marking the end of autocamping and the beginning of the motel industry."¹³

"Lilly's Auto Camp" (a cabin camp, actually) is a relic of this important transitional period. Personal property mortgages dating from the 1930s reveal that each cabin once contained a double bed, a built-in table, and one or two chairs. Some were furnished with metered gas stoves and/or "wood heaters" as well; two, with "complete lavatories."¹⁴ Communal bathroom and laundry facilities were located in one or more separate structures.¹⁵ Yet another building housed the "office" (such as it was) along with a combination grocery store, restaurant, and filling station. "Wash lines" and picnic tables were scattered about the shady grounds.

What little is known of the Lillys themselves recalls Belasco's portrait of the typical "tourist camp pioneers:" that is, a husband-and-wife team "...of humble origins," "small scale entrepreneurs...for whom a campground was originally a sideline."¹⁶ Be that as it may, their operation was a relatively sizeable one of fifteen cabins by the time of its sale in 1932. The camp seems to have remained a commercial hostelry until well into the 1930s, perhaps beyond; but the rapid development of the motel industry after 1945 quickly rendered these accommodations substandard. Today, individual cabins are occasionally rented out on an irregular basis, but the complex stands at the very edge of Gilroy's expanding urban area and will undoubtedly give way to a "higher use" in the near future.

Notes:

1. The complex is designated "Lilly's Auto Camp" in a personal property mortgage recorded April 27, 1932 in Official Records, book 608, page 525.
2. "Monterey Road" was a portion of what was known in the 1920s as, simply, "the State Highway." It ran through the coast counties to Los Angeles. See Eugene T. Sawyer, History of Santa Clara County, California (Los Angeles: 1922), 291-292; also, note #4, below.
3. Cabins are rented out to various tenants on an irregular basis, but the complex is no longer operated as a commercial hostelry.
4. See Michael W. Donley, "Highway Development, 1920-1948" in Atlas of California (Culver City, California: 1979), 94.
5. They were undoubtedly present in some capacity by September of 1927, when a "Lilly Avenue" was established at the rear of the property (see Maps, book W, pages 14, 15).

By May of 1928 they were operating a filling station on the site (see agreement between Allen Lilly and Standard Oil Corporation of California in Official Records, book 453, page 89).

6. The "North Gilroy Tract" was E. M. Schumacher's subdivision of Lot 32 of the old Las Animas rancho, recorded in September of 1927.
7. This transaction also included Lot 1 in Block 3 of the North Gilroy Tract, located to the west (or rear) of the property in question.
8. Brief reference is made to this transaction in the records of a local title insurance company, but the deed itself has not been located.
9. This parcel contains 1.18 acres, net.
10. Warren James Belasco, Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1979), 3.

The following account of the rise of the "cabin camp" is drawn from Belasco's definitive work.

11. Ibid., 133.
12. Ibid., 131.
13. Ibid., 131.
14. See personal property mortgage recorded April 27, 1932 in Official Records, book 608, page 525; and, personal property mortgage (for \$2300) recorded July 16, 1935 in Official Records, book 744, page 512.
15. The original arrangement of bathroom facilities is not clear. Physical evidence suggests that surviving cabins, at least, have always been equipped with toilets. The above-mentioned 1932 personal property mortgage lists four (apparently communal) toilets and no individual ones. The 1935 mortgage indicates that cabin #5 and cabin #6, only, had "complete lavatories."
16. We know for a fact, of course, that the Lillys were operating a roadside filling station here in 1928. See note #5, above.
17. Exclusive of official records, etc., referred to in text and notes.

PART II. SOURCES OF INFORMATION:

Old Views: None known

Bibliography:¹⁷

Belasco, Warren James, Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1979).

Donley, Michael W., Atlas of California (Culver City, California: Pacific Book Center, 1979).

Sawyer, Eugene T., History of Santa Clara County, California (Los Angeles: Historic Record, 1922).

Prepared by: Jeffrey S. Flemming
Project Historian
September, 1980

PART III. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This is an example of very early overnight cabin accommodations complex built when highway travel began to open up.

2. Condition of fabric: Fair.

B. Description of Exterior -- Office:

1. Over-all dimensions: This five bay, one story, irregular-shaped structure is approximately thirty feet by sixty-five feet.
2. Foundation: Concrete with foundation vents covered with insect screening.
3. Walls: Wooden narrow board siding on the front portion and wide drop siding on a rear wing, with corner boards, all painted a pale green. The porte cochère has been enclosed with wide board wooden siding.
4. Structural system, framing: Wooden framing system (redwood).
5. Porches, stoops, balconies bulkheads: There are two concrete steps at the front entrance on the northeast facade. The steps are a part of a concrete curb that extended across the front with gasoline pumps mounted on it. The curb is now the foundation for the front wall.

There is a wooden stoop at a side door on the southeast and northwest facades. There is an aluminum awning covering the stoop.

6. Chimneys: There is a metal flue on the face of the southwest wall, near the side entrance. There is a metal flue on the northwest wall that extends up through the overhang and above the roof.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance on the northeast wall has a wooden door with the three horizontal panels below a glass pane, wooden sill, threshold and surround. The side doors are identical and have a wooden framed screen door.
 - b. Windows and shutters: Wooden windows have one-over-one, double-hung sashes, wooden surrounds and sill. Wooden windows on the front have three-light fixed sashes.
 - c. Vents: There are wooden louver vents in the gable ends of the rear addition. Above the door on the southeast facade is a vent with wooden slats and insect screen. There is a large gable end vent on the northeast front. The vent has narrow boards spaced close together with metal insect screen behind.
8. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: The gable roofs are covered with asphalt shingles.

b. Cornice, eaves: The overhang has open eaves.

C. Description of Interior -- Office:

Interior is inaccessible.

D. Site -- Office:

a. General setting and orientation: The office sits on the southwest side of the highway facing northeast. There are several large trees immediately on either side of the office. To the left is the row of motel units that forms the southeast boundary of the site. The entire site is fenced around the rear with a wooden fence and has a wire fence across the front. There are several large pepper trees, walnut trees, almond trees and acacia trees in the side and rear yard. To the rear are several wooden sheds, a well house, shower house and chicken house.

E. Description of Exterior -- Typical Unit:

1. Over-all dimensions: This one floor, two-bay, rectangular structure is approximately twelve feet by fourteen feet.
2. Foundation: Concrete
3. Walls: Wooden narrow board siding, painted light pale green.
4. Structural system, framing: Wood framing system.
5. Porches, stoops, balconies, bulkheads: There is a concrete stoop at the entrance door. There is a shed roof covered with corrugated fibreglass and supported by wooden knee braces extending the length of the ten units, with the exception of the first unit, which is not covered. The roof is stepped as the contour of the land rises.
6. Chimneys: There is a small metal flue near the rear projecting through the roof, with a raincap on top.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The entrance on one corner of the front opens into the bedroom. The wooden door has five horizontal recessed panels, wooden surround and wooden sill. There is a wooden framed screen door.
 - b. Windows and shutters: Wooden windows have one-over-one, double-hung sashes with insect screens.
8. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: Gable roof with asphalt roll roofing. The carport has a shed roof covered with corrugated aluminum.

- b. Cornice, eaves: Open eaves. A bargeboard on the gable end has three applied pickets, one at the ridge and one each side approximately eight inches apart.

F. Description of Interior -- Typical Unit:

- 1. Floor plans: The entrance on the corner of the front leads into the bedroom. There is a window on the front wall and on one side wall. The rear wall has an opening on one side to a small kitchenette, and on the other, an opening to the toilet. The kitchenette has a window on the rear wall and a wooden counter top on the side wall. The toilet houses only a water closet and has a window on the rear wall above the water closet.
- 2. Flooring: Wooden flooring covered with asphalt tile.
- 3. Wall and ceiling finish: Wooden paneling with battens, painted, on the walls and ceiling.
- 4. Doorways and doors: Wooden framed doorways have wooden doors with two long vertical double-raised panels above two small vertical, double-raised panels. The head trim has a narrow trim extending across the jambs and projecting on each side, forming a cap, with the head trim applied on top of this.
- 5. Mechanical:
 - a. Heating: There is no heating equipment other than the kitchen range.
 - b. Plumbing: A china water closet in the toilet and a cast iron sink in the kitchen.
 - c. Electrical: Single bulb lighting fixtures, with pull switches.

G. Site -- Typical Unit:

- 1. General setting and orientation: The unit sits in a row of ten, each with a very narrow carport between. The gravel drive from the highway extends the length of the units. To the northwest is the office, and in the center near the rear of the site is the shower. The units face the northwest. There is a row of dense planting along the rear walls next to a side street.
- 2. Outbuildings:
 - a. Storage shed: Wide board wooden drop siding, concrete foundation, wooden frame structure, gable roof covered with asphalt roll roofing and wooden windows with one-over-one, double-hung sashes.

- b. Storage shed: Narrow board wooden siding, concrete foundation, wooden frame structure, gable roof covered with asphalt roll roofing, and wooden windows with one-over-one, double-hung sashes. There is a board and batten wooden door. There is a small toilet in one end.
- c. Well house: Sits near center of site and houses the water tanks and well equipment. Concrete foundation, wooden frame structure with narrow-board wooden siding, gable roof with asphalt roll roofing, and a wooden louver on each side. There is a wooden panel door on the end.
- d. Shower: Sited at rear of site, the structure has two showers, one on each side. There is a concrete foundation, wooden frame with wooden siding. The gable roof with open eaves is covered with asphalt roll roofing. The interior has concrete floors, plaster walls, exposed wooden structure ceiling, and each has a wooden window with two-over-two, double-hung sash. The single panel wooden door on the southeast opens into a drying room with a shower behind it. There is a wooden slatted structure connecting the shower to a chicken house.
- e. Chicken house: The wooden frame structure has a concrete floor, beveled wooden siding, gable roof covered with asphalt roll roofing, wooden panel doors and window openings that have no sashes. The structure is in poor condition.

Prepared by: John P. White
Project Supervisor
August 1980

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) of the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service's National Architectural and Engineering Record in cooperation with the County of Santa Clara, California. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS and Kenneth L. Anderson, Jr., Principal Architect, the project was completed during the summer of 1980 at the HABS Field Office, Santa Clara, California by John P. White, Project Supervisor (Associate Professor of Architecture Texas Tech. University); David T. Marsh, Jr., Project Foreman (Howard University); Jeffery Flemming, Project Historian (University of Chicago); Jane Lidz, Architect/Photographer; and student Architects Kimberley E. Harden (Auburn University); Melody S. Linger (University of Florida); and Mathew Poe (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University).